

# **Institutional entrepreneurs driving change: The case of gender equality in the Australian construction industry**

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## **Abstract**

Taken-for-granted rules are difficult to change. The Australian construction industry is one example, where despite considerable attempts at regulating gender equality by government and others, the industry remains steadfastly male dominated. This article investigates the drivers (i.e. why) and processes (i.e. how) of change with regard to gender equality in the workplace. Using institutional entrepreneurship, we provide insight into the change towards gender equality in the Australian construction industry. We collect data from two Australian construction companies and, drawing on interviews conducted with business leaders, look at how new meanings around gender equality and diversity are negotiated. We find that while gender equality is an important point of focus for both companies, discrepancies remain between perceptions and reality as well as people's level of readiness. We conclude with implications for theory and future research.

**Keywords:** Australian construction industry, discourse analysis, gender diversity, gender equality, institutional entrepreneurship, institutional theory

## **1. Introduction**

There are two ways of thinking about institutions: old institutionalism and new institutionalism. In the tradition of old institutional theory, 'institutions are perceived as efficient solutions [tools, instruments] to predefined problems' (Holm, 1995: 398). This view has been criticised for disregarding the role of actors and action in the creation of institutions (Battilana et al., 2009). By contrast, the tradition of new institutionalism defines institutions as 'socially constructed, routine-reproduced, program or rule system' (Jepperson, 1991: 149). Yet, this view also has its weaknesses, having been criticised for failing to explain non-isomorphic change – an intentional and planned process, often conflict-laden and that appears to unfold naturally (DiMaggio, 1991; Munir and Phillips, 2005). Indeed, institutions are said to be 'self-reinforcing' (Mackay et al., 2010: 577) or 'sticky' (Pierson, 2004: 10), making change difficult to implement even if it seems appropriate (Mackay et al., 2010; Pierson, 2004). As such, notions of agency are often neglected and actors are depicted as focused on 'continuity and conformity' (Mutch, 2007: 1124). In this context, actors are imagined to be unaware of alternatives or unwilling to change. As Zucker (1983) puts it, 'alternatives may be literally unthinkable' (p. 5) – what the literature describes as the paradox of embedded agency (Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2007; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Koene, 2006). The challenge, then, has been to develop a theory of action that recognises that individuals are not always devoted to the reproduction of habits (Battilana et al., 2009). With the introduction of institutional entrepreneurship in 1988, DiMaggio proposed just this. Institutional entrepreneurship enables us to take into account the role of the dynamic 'change-makers' in 'creat[ing] new institutions or transform[ing] existing ones' (Maguire et al., 2004: 657). It enables us to confront the paradox of embedded agency by investigating how and why changemakers (i.e. the institutional entrepreneurs) initiate conscious projects of change in a context in which meaning is predetermined by existing institutions (Koene, 2006). It therefore helps us better understand the dynamics of institutional change processes.

Institutional theory, then, enables us to better understand those social norms that have become taken for granted (Garud et al., 2007; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). Many studies have looked at organisational change from the lens of institutional entrepreneurship and in a wide variety of contexts. For example, Munir and Phillips (2005) investigated the role of the firm in the adoption of radically new technology. Theoretical gaps, however, remain. First, the vast majority of studies have emphasised the structural and practical aspects of institutionalisation – ‘describing patterns of spread [...] and pointing to the explanatory factors and consequences of institutionalization’ (Zilber, 2006: 282). The processes through which change happens and the conditions under which institutional entrepreneurs emerge have been understudied (Battilana et al., 2009). Second, institutional entrepreneurship studies tend to be retrospective and based on ‘case histories’ and ‘archival data’ (Zilber, 2006, 2007), limiting findings to past actions. Insights are to be gained by collecting real-time data and exploring the role of institutional entrepreneurs and their agency in the institutionalisation of change. Third, research investigating change with regard to institutionalised gender inequality in the workplace is limited (Mackay et al., 2010; Meyerson and Tompkins, 2007). We address these gaps by investigating the dynamics of institutional change with regard to gender equality, in real time. We set our study in the context of the Australian construction industry and ask, ‘How can institutional entrepreneurship help us better understand gender equality in the Australian construction industry?’

The Australian construction industry provides an interesting context. Despite a range of laws and regulations around gender discrimination and harassment introduced by the Australian government across industries, it remains one of the most male-dominated industries in the country, as well as around the globe (Powell and Sang, 2012; Dainty et al., 2007; EOWA, 2011). Historically, the shift to promote gender equality within the leadership of Australian business has been a slow, non-linear process (Du Plessis et al., 2014). Nationally, Australia has been slow to facilitate women’s employment, with a national paid parental leave scheme only introduced in 2011 (Baird, 2011) and male-breadwinner households remain commonplace (Brennan, 2007). Persistent barriers to gender equality include the following: stereotypes and myths about women in the workplace, gender-specific bias (perceived or real) and structural issues such as lack of workplace flexibility (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013). These barriers play out in a range of ways that negatively impact women, for example, a gender pay gap that exists across almost all industries and occupations (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2015) and challenges in achieving work–life balance, particularly where flexible work arrangements are not available (Powell and Sang, 2012). More recently, however, the Australian Government refined legislative requirements for companies with 100 employees or more, requiring them to report on both the nature and composition of gender in their workforce (Australian Government, 2012). These reporting requirements are backed by ‘softer’ non-compulsory measures from the Australian Securities Exchange (ASX) that encourages publicly listed companies to disclose and report equality policies and gender targets. While these are non-compulsory, companies who fail to disclose and report on equality policies and gender targets must make public their reason for non-disclosure.

Notwithstanding considerable attempts at change in the Australian business sector more broadly, recent figures show that women’s position in the construction industry, numerically and hierarchically, has not improved (Powell and Sang, 2013; Galea et al., 2015) but has actually fallen from 17% in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) to 12% in 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Women have minimal representation in construction trades (3%), only rising marginally in professional and management roles (14%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The Australian construction industry is not unique; women’s statistical under-representation in construction is shared across most Western nations. Women are also more likely to experience relative disadvantage and inequality in pay, career development and promotional opportunities

compared to their male counterparts (Dainty and Lingard, 2006; Mills et al., 2008). Even with the existence of formal human resources (HR) recruitment and progression procedures, in practice, recruitment and promotion operate informally and is heavily reliant on an employee's personal networks and line manager (Powell and Sang, 2013; Bagilhole et al., 2008; Dainty et al., 2000a; Sang et al., 2013). Greater career development opportunities, including working in and leading large, high-profile projects, are given to men, while women are left to negotiate stereotypes and expectations that they will leave the industry or wind back their employment to pursue motherhood (Powell and Sang, 2012; Faulkner, 2009; Mills et al., 2008; Watts, 2009). The intransigence of gender inequality in the Australian construction industry, despite attempts at change, makes it an excellent context for our study.

We collected data from two companies operating in the Australian commercial, residential, engineering and infrastructure markets. Using discourse analysis, we draw from interviews conducted with 21 business leaders to look at how new meanings are created and negotiated. We examine the extent to which company leaders – who we identify as potential institutional entrepreneurs – are responsible for effecting gender change in their businesses. Our theoretical contribution is threefold. First, we apply an institutional entrepreneurship lens to a context (gender equality in the construction industry) in which, to the best of our knowledge, such theory has not been applied. Second, we base our analysis on data collected 'in vivo' (i.e. with people directly involved) and 'in situ' (i.e. on-site and in real time). This allows us to draw conclusions in real time and explore the role of institutional entrepreneurs and their agency in institutionalising change. This has typically been absent in research in this area, which has primarily taken a retrospective approach to examining change (Zilber, 2006, 2007). Third, based on our findings we propose a framework to better understand the role and dynamics of institutional entrepreneurs in initiating and embedding institutional change.

## **2. Literature review**

Institutional entrepreneurs are 'actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones' (Maguire et al., 2004: 657). They are 'organized actors who envision new institutions as a means of advancing interests they value highly yet that are suppressed by extant logics' (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006: 29) – they can be organisations or groups of organisations or individuals or group of individuals (Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2002; Maguire et al., 2004). Institutional entrepreneurs are considered to initiate 'divergent change' (Garud et al., 2007) as they go against 'the institutionalised template for organising within a given institutional context' (Battilana et al., 2009: 68). Institutional entrepreneurship, then, helps us re-conceptualise processes of institutional change through including the dynamic 'changemakers' – that is, the institutional entrepreneur, thereby emphasising the role of agency (Clegg, 2010).

The diffusion metaphor has dominated the field of institutional theory to understand change (Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Zilber, 2008) – borrowed from physics, it suggests that institutionalisation follows as in the movement of an object and can be moved from one space to another while retaining its original structure (Zilber, 2006, 2008). This has meant that models of institutionalisation have developed on 'the assumptions that practices are adopted intact' focusing on 'patterns of spread' and 'mechanism of isomorphism' (Zilber, 2006: 282) and thereby ignoring the role actors play in interpreting and reshaping rules (see also Friedland and Alford, 1991; Lounsbury and Pollack, 2011; Rovik, 1996). Critics argue that such over-emphasis on the structural and practical aspects of institutionalisation has contributed to the neglect of institutional dynamics and the role institutional entrepreneurs play in instilling change and therefore their agency. Agency is the engagement of

actors who, 'through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 970). In the context of institutional entrepreneurship, agency relates to the role actors play in 'reshaping shared meanings' (Zilber, 2006: 300).

In this article, we return institutional entrepreneurship to its roots in sociological institutional theory. Studies emphasising the dynamics of institutionalisation processes (Battilana et al., 2009; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006) demonstrate 'how institutionalized meanings do not simply diffuse throughout an institutional field, but are actively reshaped along the way and over time' (Zilber, 2006: 282). Institutional change, then, happens through a process of negotiation, as meanings become shared and taken for granted. We follow in the tradition of Maguire and Hardy (2009) and draw on an emerging theoretical stream within institutional theory: the translation metaphor (Zilber, 2002). The translation metaphor suggests that institutions are created as meanings come to be shared and taken for granted (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). Translation 'connotes an interaction that involves negotiation between various parties, and the reshaping of what is finally being transmitted' (Zilber, 2006: 282). It differs from the diffusion metaphor since it focuses on the negotiation process that makes particular practices possible as opposed to the 'transmission of a given entity' (Zilber, 2006: 283). 'The concept of translation recognises that the content of texts, conversations, objects and so forth is not simply transferred unchanged between actors, but may be transformed as things pass from hand to hand' (Burgess et al., 2000: 5).

Consistent with the translation metaphor, we build upon a discursive perspective of institutional change (Munir and Phillips, 2005; Phillips et al., 2004; Zilber, 2007). This allows us to explore 'how structured sets of texts come to function as 'reality constructors', which help constitute the social phenomena in question' (De Cock et al., 2005: 38). Texts are central to the creation of meaning (Maguire and Hardy, 2009) and refer to a variety of forms such as, but not limited to, written documents, transcribed interviews, verbal reports and also spoken words and dialogues, artwork, symbols, and pictures (Fairclough, 2003; Phillips et al., 2004). Counter to the 'new institutionalist' belief that institutions are strict patterns of action, we argue that institutions can be constituted through discourse: 'it is primarily through texts that information about actions is widely distributed and comes to influence the actions of others' (Phillips et al., 2004: 635). Rather than actions, it is the production and consumption of texts that enable institutional change. It is through this process of social construction that definitions of reality are created and 'individuals come to accept a shared definition of social reality' (Scott, 1987: 496) – language is institutionalisation enabling (Phillips et al., 2004). The key effort by institutional entrepreneurs, then, can be interpreted as the management of meaning: 'influencing how others understand, frame, and make sense of established or new structures, practices, and behaviours' (Zilber, 2007: 1036). As such, we re-conceptualise institutional change as a discursive activity requiring ongoing efforts (Barley and Tolbert, 1997; DiMaggio, 1988; Zilber, 2007), continuous development (Zilber, 2007) through processes of social construction (Berger and Luckman, 1967) and sensemaking (Weick, 1988).

Institutional change, thus, is not a single one-time act (Berger and Luckman, 1967; Munir and Phillips, 2005; Zilber, 2007), and institutional entrepreneurs are not a 'particular species' or 'solitary heroes' (Battilana et al., 2009; Zilber, 2007). Rather, institutional change is an ongoing and complex process (Hardy and Maguire, 2008) in which institutional entrepreneurs are 'active interpreters of practices' (Hardy and Maguire, 2008: 205) whose 'interpretations can be seen as part of institutional agency – the social actions that create, reproduce and change institutions' (Zilber, 2002: 236). The role of the dynamic change maker in 'meaning-making' (Zilber, 2007) in institutional entrepreneurship is now well established (see Greenwood et al., 2002; Lawrence and Phillips, 2004; Maguire et al., 2004; Maguire and Hardy, 2006, 2009; Munir and Phillips, 2005; Phillips et al., 2004;

Rao et al., 2000). For change to institutionalise, then, institutional entrepreneurs need to 'define and explain new or changing institutions' (Zilber, 2007: 1050) through active meaning-making. New meaning, then, needs to 'infuse structures and practices' and 'legitimize by connecting [...] with taken-for-granted beliefs and values' (Zilber, 2007: 1050).

### **3. Methodology**

The literature suggests that the translation metaphor combined with a discursive approach to institutional entrepreneurship can help us better understand the dynamics of institutional change processes. Discourse analysis is not only a method enabling the examination of language used to produce explanations of the world we live in and of how individuals use language to make sense of their reality (Dick, 2004), but it is also seen as filling an epistemological function informing us about how social reality is created (Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

#### **3.1. The case studies: discourse from the construction industry**

In this article, we recognise the necessity of generating context-specific theories and therefore favour a case-oriented explanation. We follow Ragin's (1992, 1997) approach to case study methods rather than a variable-oriented approach as it enables us to emphasise the importance of context-specific results. The case study approach is frequently used in both organisational and policy analysis studies (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003) to provide a valid and nuanced, though not necessarily generalisable, view of reality (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It also provides an opportunity to test theories in new contexts (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). We selected two case study companies. These were purposely chosen as two of the largest construction companies operating in Australia, carrying out a substantial proportion of all non-residential and engineering construction industry. We focus on large construction companies for three reasons. First, they attract the majority of qualified construction professionals (both men and women) and reflect the gender composition of the industry. Second, unlike small and medium construction enterprises that tend to be family based, these major companies have a distinct culture and are the most likely to have developed policies to address gender equality and diversity. Indeed, due to their size, these organisations are obliged to develop and report on gender equality policies and programmes under the Australian Government's Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012. Furthermore, larger companies are typically at the forefront of policy innovation (and therefore more likely potential change agents than smaller companies) and supported by sizeable HR teams responsible for developing such policies. Third, these organisations invest resources in the development of their staff, both male and female, are highly committed to their well-being and need to ensure that their investments have their intended effect. In addition, these companies have an extensive supply chain and play a leading role as change agents in the industry.

The two companies share a number of similarities. They are both contractors operating in the Australian commercial, residential, engineering and infrastructure markets and were both established over 50 years ago. However, they also have some key differences, enabling an opportunity to contrast research findings from each company. Foremost among these, Company A is privately owned and Company B is publicly listed on the ASX. This is an interesting point of difference since publicly listed companies are guided by the ASX corporate governance principles and recommendations, which, as noted earlier, include non-compulsory guidelines on gender reporting. Company A is led by a chief executive officer (CEO) and executive management team, which is composed of regional managing directors, legal counsel and strategy, safety, HR and operations directors. It has over 3000 employees and approximately 15% women in professional and management roles. Company B is led by a Board, CEO and executive management team, which is composed of regional and discipline specific executives, legal counsel and corporate affairs. It has



over 10,000 employees and approximately 22% women in professional and management roles. Company B underwent a significant restructure in the past 5 years. The structure of both companies is typical and representative of large global construction companies.

### **3.2. Data collection and analysis**

This article draws from qualitative data collected as part of a larger research grant. The study aims to provide better understanding of gender equality and diversity policies and why they fail to attract, retain and progress women construction professionals in the Australian construction industry. Findings presented here draw on semi-structured interviews with business leaders and policy authors, which were undertaken with the aim to better understand recruitment, progression and work practices of both women and men.

Interviews took place in March–April 2014. Specifically, the interviews aimed to build a picture of the nature and intent of policies and programmes impacting on gender equality and develop an understanding of how these policies were sourced, designed, disseminated, measured and enforced. In addition, the interviews sought to understand the senior leaders' interpretation of gender equality and diversity, their understanding of company policies and programmes and the context within which gender equality and diversity were positioned within the business. A total of 21 purposively sampled interviews (10 in Company A and 11 in Company B) were undertaken face-to-face or by telephone and typically lasted 60–90 minutes. These were recorded with permission of the participants and anonymised to protect their identities – the recruitment and analysis have been undertaken in full compliance with our institution's ethics protocols.

In order to protect the anonymity of interviewees, we have not identified specific roles and job titles. However, 12 interviewees were men and 9 women; 14 were senior business leaders (including a CEO and chief operating officer) and 7 were diversity leaders (including a diversity manager, HR manager and policy author); 11 were in functional roles and 10 were in operational roles. Operational roles (e.g. construction management, project management, contracts administration, commercial management) represent the 'dominant group' in both companies. They are primarily construction or engineering professionals who are profit-generating and charged with delivering the core business function. Functional roles (e.g. HR, marketing, legal, accounting, administration, information technology (IT)) are multi-faceted professions who support the general operation of the business and who are usually responsible for authoring HR policies. Operational roles, however, are responsible for implementing these policies, particularly in relation to recruitment and progression (Dainty et al., 2000b). Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

The interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo (a qualitative software enabling the organisation of content-rich data text) to facilitate the organisation of texts (Richards, 2000). Coding involved searching across the data set to find common themes and repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). 'Coding can be thought of as a range of approaches that aid the organisation, retrieval, and interpretation of data [...], it can be thought of as a way of relating our data to our ideas about those data' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 26) – it is part of the analysis process, not the analysis itself. The data were coded to 'in vivo codes' – codes derived from the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Locke, 2001). Coding involved an interpretive process in which we considered meanings, looked for emergent themes and created conceptual categories. In the first instance, we looked for themes/units of meaning that could be abstracted from the data. From these themes, we looked for hierarchical relationships to further refine our coding and created second-order categories from which eventual conceptual categories could be developed (Daniel, 2012; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

## 4. Findings

A desire for change appeared shared among participants who consistently pointed to the need for increased gender equality in the construction industry. There was, however, varied understanding, readiness and engagement between participants and institutional entrepreneurs appeared to just be emerging. In the following section, we present our findings with regard to the dynamics of the change currently undergoing our two case companies.

### 4.1. Entrenched inequalities and desire for change

An initial step in the process of institutional entrepreneurship is to 'define and explain new or changing institutions' (Zilber, 2007: 1050) through active meaning-making. To investigate whether the construction of new meaning was underway, we looked at (1) whether a need for change was expressed and (2) how gender equality and diversity were defined and explained by participants.

The findings suggested a discourse of entrenched gender inequalities and a desire for change among leaders from both companies. However, the awareness of gender inequalities and the urgency for change were different for men and women. Female leaders in both companies universally understood the entrenched gender inequalities and were ready to see action to address the issue. For example, one woman noted that entrenched gender inequality was reflective of the industry's gender composition and that 'there isn't any [gender diversity] to measure' (Julie, female, operational, Company A). She added that gender inequality existed on a spectrum from 'quite extreme and overt, right through to harassment ... [to] very subtle ... it might be language or exclusion', adding, 'it's disappointingly not understood, it's still at that very old-fashioned view of ... just women's issues'. Male leaders were less consistent in their understanding of gender inequality. Zac (male, operational, Company A) noted that it was only after three senior women brought it to the attention of the executive that the entrenched nature of gender inequality came to his attention. He said,

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*I'd like to be able to say that this was [my] idea and I'm going to change the world but, we're fortunate to have three fairly senior female executives in our business who raised some questions and on fairly quickly looking at it [I] thought, yeah, what they're saying is absolutely right and we then took off on a journey.*

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James (male, functional, Company A) further acknowledged, 'I didn't realise quite how challenging the industry was from a gender diversity perspective. I didn't realise quite how non-inclusive life on a construction site could be'.

In the face of these inequalities, participants justified a need for change using various arguments. For some, it made both business and social sense – for example, 'The penny dropped only in recent years that it's non-negotiable. [...] That it completely makes business sense, let alone [...] the social views or justice [...], it's just humanistic' (Sarah, female, functional, Company A). For others, it was about 'walking the talk' and being respectful of the overarching business vision, while for others again, it was driven by a need to be representative of broader society:

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*We, as a business, [are] actively trying to ensure that we are reflective of what's happening in society. Very clearly the ratios of people in our business don't reflect*

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*that and so we're asking some serious questions of ourselves about how we can better reflect what we perceive we want our business to be. (Craig, male, operational, Company B)*

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The way in which gender equality and diversity were defined and explained by the participants (i.e. meaning-making) was constructed slightly differently across the two companies. For Company A, gender diversity was subsumed as part of a broader discourse around diversity. For example, Lisa (female, functional, Company A) stated,

*We've never led the diversity conversation with gender diversity [...]. Everyone has a diversity story. Everyone has a unique and different skillset and that's what we focus on. So whether you identify as LGBTI, whether you're from the country, whether you went for a different university, whether you've worked in a different industry, whether you're male or female it is actually what makes you have a different decision element to bring to the table. [...] We purposely never led with one element.*

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While for Company B, equality and diversity were primarily expressed as part of a strength-based approach to attract 'talent'. For example, Zac (male, operational, Company B) stated,

*We haven't flowed down some sort of high level fluffy philosoph[y], you know, [such as] we want to employ more women because that's the right social thing to do [...], we haven't gone down that path at all. [...] We've just said that we think our business would be better [...] if we've got a greater pool of people to call upon.*

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Overall, the findings indicated a shared acknowledgement of gender inequalities in the industry, with differing degrees of understanding among our two case companies and participants. It appeared active meaning-making was underway, demonstrated by a discourse characterised by a desire and need for change with gender diversity appealing to most – what Battilana et al. (2009) refers to as articulating a 'vision'.

#### **4.2. Active meaning-makers and implemented changes**

Once it was clear that a desire for change existed within the companies and an initial 'vision' for achieving this existed among business leaders, we were interested in establishing whether actor(s) or group(s) of actors stood out as active meaning-makers and therefore whether institutional entrepreneurs were driving this change and whether change, indeed, was being implemented. Alternatively, we sought to question whether the impetus for change was being driven by institutional rules, rather than the actor(s) themselves.

We started by investigating external drivers for change such as mandatory and recommended reporting practices. Participants described reporting as important in supporting the case for gender equality and diversity but stressed that it was not the main driver of change. For example, Mark



(male, operational, Company A) stated: '[it is] one thing filling out a – or having a corporate annual report that people skim through [...] but I don't think that should be the driver ... if we're going to change things'. As Koene (2006) argues, it may, however, have instilled a certain level of readiness for change in the industry. The same idea was emphasised by Zac (male, operational, Company B):

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*We have to report – it's probably helped a little bit in that if there was any resistance within the business at any level as to why are we doing all these things well, we'll say well, whether we want to or not we've got to report these things. So that's an obligation. So let's report them, but frankly, it's not driving our initiatives at all.*

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Instead, the key driver for change was identified as top-down, that is either driven by – or needing to be driven by – business leaders within the company – 'cascading' (Bill, male, operational, Company A; and Anne, female, functional, Company B). For example, 'to drive that [change] there has to be leadership accountability for gender equality and that starts at the highest levels within the company in terms of the board and/or the global leadership team' (Mark, male, operational, Company A). Similarly, Brad (male, operational, Company B) stated, 'there was acknowledgment of buy-in from the top [...] and then that enabled the, that to be cascaded down into the sort of, regional management teams and the like'. In company A, active meaning-making appeared driven by the HR department, while in Company B, the CEO stood out:

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*I think you know, [name] is a big supporter of, of diversity and I think [name] [...], there's been a series of people in senior roles who you know, [name] gave me my sort of first break and I don't think he ever looked at people as different to you know, men or women, you know it was just whoever was appropriate for the job so it was a very you know, that was a really nice, nice way of doing that. (Ruth, female, functional, Company B)*

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While the findings suggested early institutional entrepreneurs were identified in both company A and company B, a more tangible change was articulated by participants from Company B and a sense that a certain shift of mindset had been achieved. Anne (female, functional, Company B), for example, reflected on past experiences and stated:

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*I reflect back to my first stint here at [Company B] and I don't think I heard [about] diversity, whereas now it features in our national strategy [...]. I think I've seen a real shift in the organisation culture, so you know as I said two stints at the organisation and this current stint – so over the last couple of years you know diversity has become much more of a focus, has much more of a profile and the organisation culturally has a much greater awareness.*

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The findings suggest that change was not as evident in Company A, with participants recognising that, while things had started to ch

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*We're starting to recognise the power of difference and different thought and different perspectives. And we have a higher level of senior engagement sitting round the table discussing diversity as a whole. Has that translated to – in every way we do business we think of diversity or our makeup of our teams as – is as diverse as it could be? Not yet but we're on the right path. (Lisa, female, functional, Company A)*

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Overall, and for both companies, the importance of internal drivers was strongly emphasised over reporting regulations and recommendations and identified as being driven by senior leaders in the business or as needing the sponsorship of senior leaders. The findings suggested the presence of active meaning-makers driving the change internally, as well as some early evidence of change making its way through organisational structures and practices – what Zilber (2007) refers to as a process of 'infusion'. In both cases, however, institutional entrepreneurs were only just emerging.

#### 4.3. Perception of change versus reality

Our last step in understanding the dynamics of this institutional change process was to investigate the level of consensus (i.e. shared meaning) around the changes that were being implemented – what Dobbin (1994) refers to as conferring 'legitimacy'. To do so, we examined whether initiatives aimed at creating better gender equality were accepted by interviewees and whether they perceived that the need for change was accepted by others throughout their company. We also investigated whether participants were engaged in the creation of new meaning and had indeed created shared meaning.

The findings suggested that while gender equality was perceived by participants as being underway for both companies, uncertainties remained. In both companies, the discourse was not only one of the initial changes but also one in which participants recognised that more needed to be done. James (male, functional, Company A), for example, stated, 'when we look at women in senior management roles, across [Company A], we do lead the industry [...] but the numbers are pretty disappointing'. This was further emphasised by Craig (male, operational, Company B) who stated,

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*The evidence base at the moment is that we can do better. I think we're struggling to see where we can make the significant improvements that allow the quality of our women to propagate to the top of the tree.*

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This suggests that while there was impetus for 'collective meaning' (Dobbin, 1994: 228), it had not yet been achieved. For example, Donna (female, functional, Company B) argued,

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*I think it's just really starting [...] I think there's openness to it. I think there's not a real understanding for everyone [...] about what it is, and I think there's a lot of assumptions about what it is as well.*

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Despite a strong perception that change was underway, participants of both companies pointed to a certain disconnect between perceptions and reality – this was especially strong in Company A. Ross (male, operational, Company A), for example, stated,

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*The employee engagement survey showed that they [employees] felt that [Company A] was well regarded with regard to gender diversity and that we did well. But the statistics show otherwise. [...] Our findings were quite alarming actually. While the perception was good the reality is quite the reverse. [...] In the people managers up to a certain level women are reasonably well represented but then it suddenly tails off and you know that so happens to coincide with around the 30 year age group which is when women start to have families. And – and it's very, very pronounced and the reality is a lot of those women never return to the workforce or if they do it's not with [Company A].*

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This disconnect between the perception of being on the right track and how people feel about the progress being made was further emphasised by Sarah (female, functional, Company A), who indicated that there is good intent but that it is not yet infused through organisational structures and practices:

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*I think it's patchy. It's hit and miss. Most leaders (male) really don't get it. It's highly dependent and vulnerable to who the leader is and their own prejudices and natures etc [...] Procedurally everyone will have the face, the façade, you know, but it's like a tick box. It's like something that's not really fully understood, like 'oh women's issues, don't really get what they're on about' [...] So, there's some people who are experiencing project managers that are appalling even though head office has got a policy on diversity and you get an email on it and you've got a forum. But their day-to-day is facing that.*

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Dave (male, operational, Company A) remarked that while some policies were now in place, this was not enough to embedded change, since some employees might not feel able to take up these policies:

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*I still think that some people would say okay you're telling me this is the policy and I can do it, but you know what if I did do it, maybe I'm going to be – I'm going to be – it's going to be frowned on. So even though yes [name] might say this – it's okay that I do this, here in my group it may not be as acceptable so – so I sense there might be a reluctance for people to come forward and do it and I think maybe there's a bit more reluctance on people wanting to do it than managers wanting to have the conversation.*

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A similar sense of 'variation of readiness' (Donna, female, functional, Company B) was expressed by participants of Company B. For example, 'If I was to look at the organisation today I think there are layers in the organisation where gender diversity exists, and there are probably some extra layers where the organisation is aware but it doesn't exist' (Anne, female, functional, Company B). For Company B, the main challenge regarding gender equality and diversity seemed to be in the 'middle layer of staff':

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*I think we're doing really well there from the gender diversity perspective, but that staff in the middle [...], I don't think we're doing very well at all. [...] I spend time trying to crack that middle layer, like what strategically can we do to fix that middle layer. So it's good because I'm getting a lot of thinking time on that because every time I go to women's event the same thing ... we're too far removed from them. (Anne, female, functional, Company B)*

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Overall, the findings suggest that, for both companies, while change with regard to gender equality and diversity was underway, shared meaning had not yet been conferred throughout the companies. Indeed, strong discrepancies were observed between perceptions and reality, as well as people's level of readiness and sense of urgency for change. Gender equality appeared to remain narrowly defined and associated with women (as the problem and the solution).

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Using institutional entrepreneurship has enabled us to better understand the dynamics of change in contexts in which actions are prescribed by taken-for-granted norms. Our focus on business leaders as potential dynamic 'change makers' – that is, institutional entrepreneurs, together with a translation and discursive perspective, have enabled us to reposition institutional entrepreneurs as active 'interpreters of practices' (Hardy and Maguire, 2008: 205) and meaning-makers, thereby emphasising the role of agency. Collecting data in real time (Zilber, 2006, 2007) further enabled us to understand the process through which change happens and the conditions under which institutional entrepreneurs emerge (Battilana et al., 2009). This allowed us to better account for the dynamics of institutional change, and to do so in a context in which such research is lacking: institutionalised workplace gender inequality (Mackay et al., 2010; Meyerson and Tompkins, 2007). Providing equality of opportunity in the workplace is arguably the cornerstone of good employment practice (Loosemore et al., 2003) – it is important because it is 'fair' and socially just (Powell and Sang, 2012), but it is also important economically. Greater female workforce participation has been recognised as an opportunity for Australia to increase economic prosperity as well as innovative capacity and productivity (Daley et al., 2012; Toohey et al., 2009).

### 5.1. Institutional entrepreneur change framework

Our study has provided insight into initial stages of institutional change whereby a strong need for change was expressed and institutional entrepreneurs emerged as sensemakers. Based on our findings, we develop a four-step framework to better account for dynamics of institutional change and specifically how institutional entrepreneurs initiate and embed change. The four steps that emerged are summarised as follows: (1) enabling conditions – presence of conditions/characteristics in the institutional context that are conducive to change, (2) vision – articulation of a clear way forward by institutional entrepreneurs breaking with taken-for-granted norms, (3) translation of this vision – infusion of the vision into organisational structures and everyday practices such as policies,

rhetoric and procedures and (4) legitimacy – whether the institutional entrepreneurs have succeeded in conferring shared meaning and whether the vision is accepted as the new norm by all.

## **5.2. Enabling conditions**

For institutional change to occur, our findings showed that certain enabling conditions needed to be present. Indeed, while the findings showed that reporting regulations were not the main drivers of change in the context of our two case companies, we observed it contributed to changing the ‘institutional context’. Koene (2006: 366) argues enabling conditions such as these ‘prepare the ground for institutional entrepreneurship activities’. Indeed, a number of studies that have looked at how institutional entrepreneurs take up projects of change emphasise the role of these conditions (Battilana et al., 2009; Strang and Sine, 2002) – ranging from the environment’s characteristics, as well as the institutional entrepreneurs’ characteristics, social position and interaction between the two. That is, the impact the environment has on the institutional entrepreneurs and, in turn, the way institutional entrepreneurs perceive their environment depend on their social position. In the case of our two companies, drivers of change were identified for both companies with a tendency towards a top-down approach and the importance of internal drivers strongly emphasised by participants. However, the top-down nature of these drivers was also influenced by our interview sample, which comprised business leaders only. For both companies, the lack of women in senior positions meant that men remained in position of power/authority – although, the few women in those senior positions were fervent advocates and powerful drivers of this change. Such imbalance potentially contributed to gender equality and diversity appearing narrowly defined and associated with women both as the problem and the solution (Galea et al., 2015). Indeed, we found that the men we interviewed were generally more positive about progress towards gender equality, whereas women felt that more needed to be done. For practitioners at this early stage of the change process, this means that an environment conducive to change needs to be created. This can be done, for example, by organising forums/events in which all employees can actively participate and ensure that gender equality is on the agenda. Early buy in from those in positions of power (e.g. operations manager) is also important to facilitate the next steps of the change process.

## **5.3. Vision**

A vision needs to emerge, one that promotes practices that break with taken-for-granted norms and appeal to the actors needed for implementation (Battilana et al., 2009). Our findings indicated a shared acknowledgement but a differing level of understanding of gender inequalities. The participants produced a discourse characterised by a strong desire and a need for change. We noted, however, that such vision did not develop in a vacuum – that is, it is a process that takes time. While institutional entrepreneurs have a critical role to play in making sense and promoting this vision, we found that it was out of this process that institutional entrepreneurs emerged. Indeed, the findings suggested that it was through these initial discussions, these back and forth conversations during which taken-for-granted norms were called into question and alternatives suggested that new meaning was created and some individuals rose as leading meaning-makers. It is also a time when individuals get a better sense of the environment around them through early responses and therefore the effort that will be required to drive and implement this change and whether they are indeed willing to put this effort in. The findings thus suggest that institutional entrepreneurs appeared over time during this process and as a result of accumulated efforts. In practice, this is a time during which emerging institutional entrepreneurs need to formalise and actively promote their vision. This can be done through formal workshops to discuss new policies and implementation strategies. More specifically, for gender equality, a review of the values underpinning the corporate culture to determine whether the company is gendered and exclusionary could be conducted. The impact of existing policies could also be assessed to develop an understanding of potential

unintended gendered consequences. It is important for emerging institutional entrepreneurs at this stage of the change process to ensure that new diversity policies are promoted as relevant to all employees, not just women.

#### **5.4. Translation**

This vision, then, needs to infuse through the structures and practices at play (Battilana et al., 2009; Zilber, 2006, 2007). Our findings showed that change cannot institutionalise without a strong and unified vision – indeed, a divided vision is said to weaken translation (Salignac, 2012). Institutional entrepreneurs play a vital role in the infusion process by promoting the vision through instigating dialogues and ensuring information flows smoothly and homogeneously across the organisation. In the context of our study, our two case companies were only just starting on their change journey. We saw that without a strong vision and institutional entrepreneurs in place, the change was unlikely to occur. For practitioners, this means that ownership of the change process by operational staff is an important part of its institutionalisation. It is also important to ensure that new policies are promoted by those in positions of power to convey leadership support, as well as being clearly communicated and easy to understand so that all employees can participate.

#### **5.5. Legitimacy**

Change is said to have institutionalised when legitimacy is conferred and when new rules have ‘achieve[d] collective meaning’ (Dobbin, 1994: 228). Legitimacy, Suchman (1995: 574) argues, is ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’. It is best conferred when institutional entrepreneurs’ subject position (Battilana et al., 2009; Foucault, 1972; Munir and Phillips, 2005) allow them to be seen as ‘highly legitimate actors’ (Tracey et al., 2011: 61). For legitimacy to occur, actors need to fully engage with meaning-making. They may ‘collaborate and contest with each other at the same time’ (Zilber, 2007: 1050) allowing for a series of transformations (Latour, 1999; Maguire and Hardy, 2009) both in existing structures as well as the institutionalising model. Information dissemination and knowledge production are crucial to this process as it is through access to information that actors come to gain knowledge of the proposed alternative in turn enabling ‘long-term commitment’, ‘long-term viability’ (Murray et al., 2006: 189). Interestingly, actors ‘do not have to be successful in implementing [...] change to be considered institutional entrepreneurs’ (Battilana et al., 2009: 70). For institutional change to occur, however, they must succeed to connect this new meaning with existing taken-for-granted norms (Zilber, 2007) for new norms to legitimise and achieve ‘collective meaning’ (Dobbin, 1994: 228). At this stage of the change process, it is important that practitioners ensure that implementation strategies are established so that all employees have the opportunity to engage with new policies. This can be done by trialling new policies on-site and making sure that feedback is invited to involve all employees, enforce implementation and identify practices and norms that may undermine gender equality initiatives. By this stage, champions in positions of power can also be assigned to enforce implementation.

While our four-step framework provides a way forward in investigating the institutionalisation of change, there are several limitations to this article, which invite further research. Our interviews were conducted at a senior level implying that meaning-making was only evidenced for a certain group of people. Further data need to be collected to investigate whether change agents only exist among senior business leaders, or whether they also emerge among other key personnel within companies. This will be investigated in subsequent stages of this research. Further data collection



will also enable stronger conclusions with regard to legitimacy and whether collective meaning has been achieved, notably whether the workforce at the coalface sees the vision of these institutional entrepreneurs as legitimate. This may be particularly problematic if new policies and initiatives aimed at achieving change are seen to be driven by the HR department since Ness and Green (2013) observe a lack of respect and commitment to HR policy by construction professionals. At worst, they are seen as 'namby-pamby', irrelevant and directionless (Ness and Green, 2013: 26–28). They are seen as a barrier to 'getting work done' and are antagonistic to the traditional autonomy enjoyed by construction project leaders – highlighting the need for ownership and responsibility of policy implementation by operational staff. In the context of the male-dominated industries, subsequent research could also explore the role gendered environments play in shaping institutional entrepreneurship and whether the actor's gender influences how the vision is understood, adopted and legitimised.

A further limitation is that the research is based on case studies, which limits our ability to draw conclusions at the industry level. However, the findings showed that the regulatory environment merely acted as an enabling condition and that institutional change appeared to be happening differently for our two case companies. Conclusions can be drawn that this change was, therefore, not happening at the industry level thereby highlighting the significant role of institutional entrepreneurs to drive this change in their respective companies. As the change appears happening at the company level, it might mean that it will take more time to filter down to smaller companies, while bigger ones are more prone to innovation. While our research cannot necessarily be generalised to the construction sector or other businesses, our in-depth, in situ case study approach has enabled us to develop a framework for understanding institutional change and the role of institutional entrepreneurs within this, which can be tested in future research with other companies both within and outside the construction industry and with other areas of change beyond gender equality and diversity.

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